

By Curtis Johnson

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*President Trump salutes his supporters at a political rally at the Charleston Civic Center in Charleston, West Virginia, on August 21, 2018. Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images*

The Trump administration's recent announcement of rule changes to the Endangered Species Act (ESA) will blow a hole through protections that have been crucial to preventing extinctions and to helping the recovery of many threatened species. The changes, announced by the Interior Department's, Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Marine Fisheries Service, will take effect in September.

About 1,600 plant and animal species in the U.S. are listed under the ESA. It's been estimated the ESA has prevented [227 species](#) from going extinct. It has a 99 percent success ratio, meaning only 10 species ever listed have gone extinct. According to a recent [study](#), 77 percent of once-endangered marine mammals and sea turtles protected by the ESA are now recovering. Without the ESA, it is very likely many iconic as well as many lesser-known species would have disappeared forever. Among others, the ESA is believed to have saved the bald eagle, the monk seal, the leatherback sea turtle, the grizzly bear, the gray wolf, the California condor, the snowy plover, and humpback and gray whales. It is also protecting [plant](#), insect and other species that are vital parts of natural ecosystems.

These changes to the ESA will damage the act's ability to protect species in a number of ways.

First, a blanket rule automatically extending endangered species protections to newly designated threatened species has been torpedoed. Only threatened species that have special rules set up for them will now receive the greater protections given to endangered species. States could now open hunting or trapping seasons or allow other means that kill off threatened species. Noah Greenwald, endangered species director of the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), told *Truthout* that there is currently a backlog of around 500 species before the FWS under consideration for threatened status. As a result of the changes he said, "Threatened species really won't have any protections at all" making threatened status an "almost meaningless designation."

The new rules change the establishment of critical habitat that is crucial for the survival of threatened species.

If a species is impacted by climate change but not primarily by habitat destruction, the new rules won't designate critical habitat, even though climate change-threatened species need more habitat protection, not less, Greenwald said. "The rules also make it harder to designate unoccupied habitat. So both of these things are very bad for climate change-impacted species because there's a decent chance they'll have to move."

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***would have disappeared forever.***

Unoccupied habitat is habitat not yet occupied by the species but that would be beneficial to a species and could help it survive if a species were forced to move, by say, climate change. Scientists have already documented the migration of species northward and to new habitats as a result of climate change, so the need for critical habitat designations isn't just theoretical.

Greenwald pointed up the example of the wolverine. Only about 300 wolverines are estimated to be left in the wild in the U.S. They are dwindling, particularly as a result of climate disruption lessening mountain snowfall. Wolverines are currently up for a listing decision and are likely to be given threatened status but no designated physical habitat under the new rules. Greenwald says wolverines are affected by winter sports and things like ski resort development because they rely on spring snowfall at high elevations for denning. But since it's hard to predict exactly how various habitats will be impacted by climate change, the animals are unlikely to be given critical habitat designation now by the FWS rule changes.

Environmental groups are also condemning the ESA changes because they remove language requiring that decisions on protecting species be based solely on science "without reference to possible economic or other impacts of determination." The new rules allow economic calculations to be made in considering protection of species. This could open the door to weighing those costs against protecting a species. For instance, when deciding whether protecting a certain species threatened by logging of old growth forest is outweighed by the economic benefit of logging. FWS Assistant Director Gary Frazer insisted science would remain the sole basis of determining protections, but the whole attempt to weaken the ESA for many years (mainly by Republicans) has always sought to open the door to overrule protecting species in favor of big capitalist business interests like logging and fossil fuel extraction.

Trump officials are trying to cover over their true intentions by speaking of "updating" or even "improving" the Act. Interior Department head David Bernhardt, a longtime ESA [opponent](#) and advocate for [coal and oil interests](#), now claims to just make the ESA more "clear and efficient" to "ensure it remains effective in achieving its ultimate goal — recovery of our rarest species."

Jacob Malcom of Defenders of Wildlife doesn't buy it. "They're going to make these arguments because that's the only way they're going to have any traction in trying to defend them, but they're simply not true," he told *Truthout*.

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Greenwald concurs. "They say they're going to rely on the best scientific information in making their decisions but what's the point of doing the economic analysis?" he told *Truthout*. Greenwald said these changes will also create pressure by large monied interests to list species as threatened instead of endangered, because they will get less habitat protection. Republicans in Congress like

[John Barrasso](#)

, who have conducted a years-long attempt to undermine and do away with ESA protections, also see these changes as a "good start" and a gateway to even more drastic gutting of the Act, while claiming to "update" and "strengthen" it.

Facing criticism for the rule changes, Trump officials have simply doubled down on their assault on species, [denying](#) endangered protections to six more species on August 14.

CBD, Earthjustice and the attorneys general of California and Massachusetts have announced they will go to court to stop the rule changes.

## **Extinction and the Larger Ecological Crisis**

The assault on the ESA happens at a moment of global mass extinction and climate crises. It will further that crisis unless prevented.

“When we’re seeing this kind of crisis ... we should be strengthening laws we know are effective at saving species,” Malcom told *Truthout*. “Instead, the Trump administration is doing the opposite. They are weakening the rules, making it easier for harm to happen to these species and ultimately to drive species closer to extinction.”

In May, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) [reported](#) that up to 1 million species are threatened with extinction. The report said “nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history — and the rate of species extinctions is accelerating, with grave impacts on people around the world now likely.”

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According to the report, three-quarters of the land-based environment and about 66 percent of the marine environment have now been significantly altered by human actions, and land-based habitats have fallen by 20 percent. Approximately 40 percent of amphibian species, 33 percent of reef-forming corals and a third of all marine mammals are threatened. Scientists have also been finding evidence of a collapse of insects in certain places, leading to fears of an [apocalypse](#) at the base of the food chain.

About one-fourth of the global land area is “traditionally owned, managed, used or occupied by Indigenous Peoples.” And areas with large concentrations of Indigenous Peoples and many of the world’s poorest people are now “projected to experience significant negative effects from global changes in climate, biodiversity, ecosystem functions and nature’s contributions to people.” IPBES Chair Robert Watson said, “We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide.”

The gutting of the ESA happens against a backdrop of other human-caused catastrophes that has been escalating with shocking rapidity and scope, this summer especially.

This July ranked as the [hottest month](#) ever recorded. An intense heat wave scorched the northern hemisphere, causing between [12 and 24 billion tons](#) of

Greenland's ice to melt in a single day. Scientists said the melt was reaching levels climate models hadn't

[predicted until 2070](#)

. In the Arctic, extremely hot temperatures and resulting drought set off massive wildfires that are

[visible from space](#)

. In vast regions of Siberia, the smoke got so bad that, mixed with dark clouds, it caused the sun to "disappear," as also happened last summer. Now residents talk about this as the sun "going off." Waters are so warm in some Alaskan rivers that salmon are literally being

[killed off](#)

.

The increased warming of the Arctic is causing a feedback loop releasing even more greenhouse gases by melting frozen permafrost. "Arctic permafrost isn't thawing gradually, as scientists once predicted," reports [National Geographic](#). "Geologically speaking, it's thawing almost overnight."

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If fossil fuel burning isn't dramatically altered, in a few decades, emissions of carbon and methane from melting permafrost will contribute as much to greenhouse emissions as that of China, currently the world's largest emitter. Meanwhile, in the Bering Sea, [warming ocean waters](#) are triggering ecological disaster, killing off seabirds, seals, walruses and whales at rates not seen before. Rick Thoman, a scientist with the Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Policy, said at a public forum in Nome, Alaska, "We're not approaching the cliff. We've fallen off it."

## Trump's Multileveled and Criminal War on Nature

Given the cataclysm already engulfing the globe, emergency measures are needed to address the crisis.

Nothing like this is occurring, and in the U.S., Trump is instead barreling ahead in ways that will further destroy species and ecosystems to increase profitability for capitalism with what could rightfully be called life-destroying criminality.

A report in [Scientific American](#) details how the Trump administration is “torpedoing climate science.” Another [report](#) reveals that after meeting with Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy, Trump personally intervened with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to force a withdrawal of opposition to the proposed Pebble Gold and Copper Mine that will likely devastate the habitat of the world’s richest and most pristine remaining salmon run, in Bristol Bay, Alaska. Trump’s Interior Department is also being [exposed](#) for suppressing science in an environmental assessment of drilling plans in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge’s coastal plain. Government scientists warning of the likely damage to caribou, polar bears and Native communities are being [disregarded](#).

And on another front, Trump’s EPA has continued to refuse to stop the use of dangerous pesticides that are killing endangered plants and animals, including important pollinators. In the case of the pesticide chlorpyrifos, which has been shown to cause neurological and developmental damage to humans and animals, the EPA reversed a ban on its use even though the agency knew it could [jeopardize the existence](#) of almost 1,400 endangered plants and animals.

In July, Trump gave a speech on what he claimed were the great achievements of his government on the environment, including how under him, the U.S. has the world’s cleanest air and water. However, as Brett Hartl, government affairs director of the Center for Biological Diversity told *Truthout*, “Since he’s been elected, the air has gotten dirtier, the water has gotten dirtier, the amount of enforcement of our environmental laws has dropped off a cliff so polluters



are getting away with much more, and they're cutting the science and the staff to do the basic research to monitor the air and water."

The CBD has filed 151 lawsuits to date challenging the Trump administration's moves that would cause damage to the environment, species and people. The scope of the CBD lawsuits is remarkable, and [reviewing them](#) is an excellent way to take in the awful reality of what the regime is attempting to do and the legal attempts to stop this. Hartl said that a number of the lawsuits and legal actions filed by CBD and others have met with success; for instance, blocking Trump moves to open up Arctic waters for drilling, stopping the Keystone XL Pipeline for a time, stopping construction of an open-pit copper mine in Arizona, and winning protected status for a number of species.

The Trump regime is not only a threat to endangered species, but to all species — including our own. Preventing mass extinction and addressing the climate crisis is a global imperative, and time is short.

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